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ABSTRACT

The consideration of school choice plans raises policy questions for school administrators. This paper addresses pragmatic concerns about definitions and policy questions related to educational finance. Interdistrict choice, emphasizing families' right to choose among existing public schools, raises questions regarding transportation and facilities planning responsibilities, Chapter 1 funding, and information distribution costs. Second-chance programs, which extend interdistrict choice and postsecondary options to at-risk youth through alternative programs, can face the same financial problems as interdistrict plans where inequities already exist or where the state share of per pupil expenditure is low. "Hard" state funding should support alternative schools and their staff development and training costs. Controlled choice plans, requiring all families to choose a school within the district, do not involve funding transfers between districts or systems, but may require the reallocation of funding between schools. Extra costs include transportation, parent information, planning, technical assistance, and staff development. Intradistrict choice plans based on teacher-initiated schools have high startup costs and raise administrative control questions. Magnet schools, aiming at school improvement through special resources, require additional costs for transportation, improved facilities, special programs, and additional staff and staff development. Finally, postsecondary options for upper division high school students raise equity and equal access concerns. (11 references) (MLH)

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Educational Choice:

Practical Policy Questions

By

Patricia F. First, Ed.D.

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Educational Choice:

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EDUCATIONAL CHOICE: PRACTICAL POLICY QUESTIONS

Patricia F. First, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

The consideration of choice plans raises practical policy questions for school administrators in Maine and throughout the country. Though the debates about choice and the policy questions surrounding its funding operate on many levels, in this paper we will attempt to address pragmatic concerns about definitions and policy questions. At the extreme of practicality some say choice (however they are defining it) will not cost more money and others say it cannot be accomplished without large infusions of new money. At the extremes choice, however defined, is seen from that of the panacea for all the ills of public education to a demon of destruction for public education.

Choice is a topic on the mind of every politician, educational policy maker and educator these days, but the uses of the term vary and considerable confusion exists as to what it is and means. At the Fall, 1989 President's Education Summit with the Governors the participants in the Working Session on Choice and Restructuring looked to choice to both improve student performance and empower parents and teachers. Choice was also seen as the answer to restructuring the schools to reflect the current needs of our society and to move the school system away from a 19th century agrarian model.

In the Spring of 1990, the Minnesota State Board of Education, pioneers of choice systems, was considering a proposal to abolish the state's 433 school districts and create a system of state chartered schools ("District Destruction", 1990). This example tells us that even pioneering definitions of choice now look like tinkering with an old system when they are compared with the sweeping choice plans being

discussed and seriously considered in 1990. In this paper, choice is defined broadly and the various manifestations of choice are discussed.

DEFINITIONS

Many different kinds of choice plans are described in educational literature. While basic definitions all include the provision of options from which parents and/or students can select, there are probably six different basic types of choice plans (Education Commission of the States, 1989).

- Interdistrict choice and postsecondary options plans emphasize the rights of families to choose among existing public schools. It is assumed that school improvement will follow from the competition choice creates among schools. To insure that all families have equal access to these choices, the plans require special guidelines regarding transportation, admissions and parent information.

- Second-chance plans extend interdistrict choice and postsecondary options to at-risk youth as well as offer them alternatives to traditional schools, thus increasing their range of educational options. In doing so, the plans purport to provide improved learning opportunities for participating students with equity and school-improvement issues a secondary concern.

- Controlled-choice plans, which require all families to choose the school their child attends, emphasize overt commitment to equity. To insure that all families have access to schools of acceptable quality, plans must incorporate special provisions for implementing school-based improvement. Because of the priority given to racial balance, parental freedom to choose a school is limited by the requirements of that goal.

- An intradistrict choice plan based on teacher-initiated schools views parental freedom as a necessary adjunct of school improvement, but features school restructuring as its centerpiece. In such plans special efforts would be required to insure that diverse schools are accessible to and equitably serve all families within a school district.

- Magnet schools set school improvement and family choice within a framework that allows some district families to choose from a handful of schools with special resources. Because not all students in a district can attend a magnet school, inequities can be overcome only when all schools in the district are "magnetized".

When one looks at the fundamental questions in any of these educational choice plans, it soon becomes apparent that there is both a demand side and a supply side to the issue. According to Elmore (1988), the demand side asks the question of whether the consumers of education should be given the central role in choosing their education. The supply side of the issue poses the question of whether the suppliers in education should be given the autonomy to respond to the consumers in a flexible way. How one answers these questions influences dramatically both the financing and programming of public education.

When choice in education is discussed, as it was recently at the education summit attended by the governors and the president, the emphasis is almost exclusively on the demand side, the right of parents to choose the appropriate education for their child. But Elmore emphasizes that policies affecting choice must be evaluated from both the supply and demand sides. He also emphasizes that policies affecting choice must take into account the democratic ideals of public education as

well as the individual preferences of both suppliers and consumers. Elmore breaks potential policies regarding choice into four discreet categories: finance, attendance, staffing and content. By organizing these four categories in various ways, alternatives can be constructed to the current prevalent system of local bureaucratic centralization. Meaning can then surround the practical and political language of the debate. For example, in Education Week (4/11/90) a Minnesota State Board member was quoted: "It is time to destruct the system," he says, arguing that the local units are run by entrenched bureaucracies resistant to change. Careful consideration of categories needing policy attention is obviously preferable to such rhetoric.

Elements of school organization can be rearranged to alter the relationship between clients and providers. If one really looks freshly at all four categories (finance, attendance, staffing and content), real options are identifiable to what a school or a school district could look like or be. Elmore suggests some additional roles for school districts and school boards, such as defining an acceptable definition of school within the district. Such definitions would be necessary if new suppliers open schools. But it seems that the natural extension of choice when it is most broadly defined could be the elimination of school districts and school boards as we now know them.

An important point to be gleaned from the Elmore piece is that the locus of control of education can be shifted many ways, to the provider as well as to the consumer. Lump-sum allocations and contracting represent the use of finance to shift the locus of allocation decisions from central administrators to providers. Vouchers and tax credits represent a shift to consumers. The financing of consumer co-operatives is a hybrid, a mechanism for funding consumers in an organized capacity (Elmore, 1988).

POLICY QUESTIONS

With our thinking broadened we can consider some of the specific policy questions that arise with each of the six kinds of choice. In considering choice we are led into a discussion of the fundamental institutional structure of public education. Nothing much, then, can be left unquestioned or untouched. Almost all the questions listed below can be asked about any of the six kinds of choice. Most of them are highlighted under only one category.

Interdistrict Choice - Policy Questions

In considering interdistrict choice, will the state transfer general education revenue and capital expenditure revenue from the resident district to the new district? Should there be any extra funds to the receiving district? Does this depend upon whether or not the formulas are already equalized? Whose responsibility is transportation? (The governors at the summit kept coming back to this problem in the discussions of choice. Though it is only one of the finance issues involved in choice, it is a very visible one and it is a problem everyone can see and understand. Therefore it will probably continue to get more than its share of any political discussions about choice.) Also to be considered is the more long-range problem of the planning and financing of school construction. At the President's summit, the Governors were also concerned with federal funding issues, for instance whether or not Chapter I funds would follow the student.

The distribution of information is potentially a major cost. If this responsibility is left to local districts an equity question may arise if poorer or less literate families do not receive sufficient and appropriate information in formats they can use. The need for parental information and how parents make choices has been discussed in an article by Maddaus (1990). Maddaus' review of research suggests that there are problems

with both liberal and conservative views that parental choice of public schools can be a means of promoting excellence while ensuring equity. One of these problems is the distribution of information about schools that will enable parents to make choices that will benefit their children. Potential problems may also develop as schools begin to not be chosen. A long slide into oblivion may create years of poor education for children who remain in the schools with many "leavers" if the school's financing continues to be based on enrollment levels. Such problems might, however, serve the interests of the state and local districts in another way by moving small underfunded districts toward consolidation.

There are other policy questions to be addressed in considering an interdistrict choice plan. Some are: Will the plan be mandatory for all districts or voluntary? Will there be limitations on the districts a student can choose? Can and will admission criteria be established? Who will handle admissions?

Some critics fear that choice is, or could be, a "cover up" for other state policy agendas. For instance, is a proposed interdistrict choice plan being used as a mechanism for school district consolidation? Is this legitimate if it is? And how do these plans coincide with equity goals and with equity gains made over the last two decades? Also to be considered are the potential state department roles and responsibilities.

Second-chance Programs - Policy Questions

Second-chance programs can face the same financial problems as interdistrict choice plans where finance inequities already exist or where the state share of per-pupil expenditures is low. If second-chance programs are to mean alternative schools, "hard" state funding must support these kinds of schools which have traditionally existed on "soft" money. Information, outreach and communication all become very

crucial in second-chance programs, as does multicultural sensitivity. Some hidden costs here could be training and staff development.

Other finance questions arise regarding second chance programs: Should public funding be extended to age 21? Past age 21? Considered here could be vouchers for life-long learning to be cashed in at any age. Should alternative programs receive supplemental funding because the challenges are greater? Does the state need to be sure that a certain number and/or variety of alternative programs are created and maintained? Partnerships will need to be developed between and among agencies and organizations that serve individuals at risk.

Intradistrict Choice: Controlled Choice - Policy Questions

Though intradistrict choice does not involve the movement of funds between districts or systems, it may lead to the reallocation of funding between schools. Extra costs will include transportation, parent information, planning, technical assistance and staff development. Philosophically, controlled choice assures that all schools are magnet schools, so "special funding" for magnets is not an issue. However, enough money to make all schools the quality of magnet schools is a very big issue which has been raised by the administrators in New York's Community District 4. There, most of its highly publicized as successful alternative schools have benefitted from extra funding, including millions of dollars from the federal Magnet Schools Assistance Grants Program and its predecessor, the Emergency School Aid Act. The extra funding enabled administrators to hire more teachers and reduce class sizes and it helped provide materials and equipment to develop the thematic programs offered in many of the district's schools. District 4 administrators have publicly stated that choice doesn't mean anything without small schools and that choice cannot improve schools without major infusions of new money (Snider, 1989). This view, that choice cannot

succeed without large amounts of new money, is disputed by others. (See, for example, Walberg, 1988.)

Other policy questions include: How will the community be involved in the planning process? Will teachers be allowed to transfer between schools, or to create completely new schools? What will these plans mean for school-based management and for the kinds of decisions now made at the school level? A big equity question could be how an urban district's intradistrict choice plan would relate to a state's interdistrict plan?

Intradistrict Choice: Teacher-initiated Schools - Policy Questions

This plan has as its long-range goal the magnetization of all schools and thus the financial questions parallel those in controlled choice. The difference here is in the cooperative management of the school by a group of teachers with shared vision. Thus continued self-designed staff development might be a substantial additional cost. Start-up costs would also be particularly high.

There are many control questions: Who will decide school themes, the teachers, the central office, both, others? How can central office operations be restructured to support building level diversity? How can local school boards encourage and support the restructuring that would be necessary?

Intradistrict Choice: Magnetic Schools - Policy Questions

From years of desegregation efforts we have much material on magnet schools. They do often cost more. The additional costs come from transportation, improved facilities, higher material costs for special programs, additional staff and staff development. Equity issues are so tightly interwoven with finance questions here that it is difficult to discuss either alone. The basic finance question is whether magnets will receive ongoing funding above that of regular school programs or whether magnet

funds should be distributed across all schools in a district in an effort to magnetize all schools.

Other policy questions include how to design an equitable admissions policy? How will priorities for admission be established? How can admissions be accomplished fairly so as not to favor those families who are best informed and able to wait in line? How can evaluation of the educational benefits be conducted?

Postsecondary Options - Policy Questions

Postsecondary options allow upper division public high school students to take courses for high school or college credit at post-secondary institutions. It is a choice plan in the broad definition of the term, the definition of opening options within public education for both students and parents.

Finance concerns in postsecondary options include: Should both the high school and the post-secondary institution be funded. Should state funding be divided between the two? Though perhaps equitable, would dual funding discourage the competition which is at the philosophical heart of choice?

Information is again an issue. If making information available is not state mandated and state funded, all students do not have an equal opportunity to participate. Is there to be subsidization for college tuition? Again, an equity as well as a finance issue is raised. There is also the question of whether additional funding should be available to either the sending or receiving institution or both to cover the increased planning and record keeping costs.

Other policy questions include: How will high school students be guaranteed access to the program? How will credits be awarded? Obviously this kind of choice demands a higher level of cooperation between public K-12 education and public colleges and universities than has often occured in the past. Should private universities be included? The coordinating role for a state agency could be enormous.

DISCUSSION

In all of the six options described and discussed above, choice, as an instrumental value, serving the sovereignty of citizens in a democracy, surfaces as the fundamental value underlying the movement. Marshall, Mitchell, and Wirt (1990) call the choice value the most fundamental of all American political views. In school finance circles it has been called liberty. The other fundamental values which interact with choice in the financing and structuring of American schools are quality (or adequacy), efficiency and equity (Marshall, Mitchell, and Wirt, 1989). Confusion of these values and the goals associated with them is a potential problem and is muddying the choice discussions. For instance, choice can be doomed to failure if success is equated with efficiency, instead of with providing choice (Hickrod, 1989).

Turning to choice can be an opportunity for states to refocus on the relationships between services and funding. The financing of education has come to be viewed as an issue separate from the provision of education services. The massive restructuring that is needed if a state truly turns to choice presents means to rejoin these issues.

According to Odden (1990), there are three other major conditions, in addition to financial concerns, that are critical to making choice programs work. The first is a school based management system because if families are to make informed choices about the schools their children will attend they need access to easily interpretable information about particular schools. The second major need is for states to develop equitable selection and transfer systems. And thirdly, all states to some extent, and states with diverse student bodies to a greater extent, will need to devote resources to finding creative solutions to issues of pluralism, diversity, and integration.

Under the name "liberty," meaning flexibility and creativity, choice has been a traditional criterion for the evaluation of state school finance systems. And under our democratic tradition of electing school board members, choice has been in operation via choice of who represents us. The difference now is that choice (or liberty) is now spoken of as choice for parents and students rather than as local control or choice for communities and school boards. That the concept has long been with us is important as we look for meaning around the practical policy questions in choice.

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